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Response to Intervention: A Blueprint for Catholic Schools

Michael J. Boyle

National Catholic Educational Association, 2010

\$12, 68 pages

Reviewed by Doreen Engel

Prevention—that is the rallying cry of “Response to Intervention” (RtI). Using this conceptual framework, educators can prevent, not just identify, many learning and behavioral problems. In his book, *Response to Intervention: A Blueprint for Catholic Schools*, Dr. Michael J. Boyle provides an excellent road map for Catholic school faculty, explaining how RtI works and how Catholic schools can implement it.

To understand the basic premise of RtI, imagine a school playground. Of course there will be some bumps and bruises. But whether those are rare or frequent, and whether they are serious or mild, often depends on how carefully the playground is designed, how thoughtfully it is supervised, and how much effort is put into teaching and encouraging games that are unlikely to result in injury. Prevention makes a lot more sense than wasting time and money in doling out bandages. The same is true of children who struggle academically or behaviorally. Whether such students will need basic accommodations, short-term support, or years of intensive remediation often depends on how carefully the educational environment is designed, what responses are available when a problem does emerge, and how quickly and faithfully specific strategies are used for children who need them.

As a cornerstone of the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA or sometimes abbreviated as IDEA), RtI is transforming how our public school colleagues conceptualize learning disabilities and the classroom teacher’s role in preventing, not just identifying, them. Boyle makes a compelling case that there is a place for RtI in Catholic schools as well. Understanding RtI will certainly help with those students that we do refer to the public school for evaluation. More importantly, implementing aspects of RtI in our Catholic schools will mean that more children will get the critical interventions they need so that small learning needs do not grow into significant impediments.

As Boyle states, many elements of RtI will not be new to seasoned educators. What is new is the framework of planning for access to tiered instruction.

Most proponents of RtI refer to three “tiers” of intervention. The term “interventions” here simply means research-based methods for educating children in regard to a specific skill or concept. This can be as simple as small group (tier one intervention) or as complex as one-on-one instruction from a highly trained specialist (tier three intervention). All children have access to tier one interventions. Some children will need access to tier two, and a few children (according to Boyle, about 3-7% of all children) will require tier three interventions.

Boyle states emphatically early on in the text: “Remember, a major characteristic of Response to Intervention is data-based decision making” (p. 7). Tier one includes those excellent research-based methods and strategies that are available to all children at the school. These include universal screening in academic and behavioral domains, access to a high-quality, standards-based curriculum, and use of research-based teaching methods. Excellent tier one approaches mean that fewer children will need anything “special” in order to advance in their academic, social, and behavioral development. The focus at this stage is clearly on prevention. In the playground example, a school has excellent tier one interventions (in fact, preventions) in place if it has a safe play area, good supervision, and quality first aid care for all children. But if a single child continues to be injured frequently or if too many children are injured (even though slightly) in a designated period of time, something needs to change. The school must engage in “Response to Intervention,” meaning the school systemically looks at data, has structures in place for team planning, and has developed the ability to respond with interventions that can be available when concerns arise. Teachers respond based on how students respond. As Boyle explains, this is exactly what good teachers and good schools do when a student’s academic or behavioral performance is falling. Targeted interventions are available and ready when teachers begin to see a pattern in a problem that has not been resolved. Boyle reminds us that the school will need an “intervention protocol” at this point. That is, making sure that “a standing set of intervention techniques...exists so that students who are experiencing difficulty can have quick and easy access to it” (p. 15).

Tier two interventions rely on a formalized team approach—conversations with other educators, administrators, the student, and the parents—so that information is shared, basic plans are made, and, most importantly, teachers follow through on those plans and measure whether or not the interventions have been effective. A second targeted intervention critical to tier two is access to small group support for students.. It is important to note that tier

two interventions can be organized and planned for ahead of time; there will definitely be some children who will need them, although data and a team process will determine exactly who, when, and for how long. As Boyle states, it is at tier two that “the staff of the Catholic school may begin to panic” (p. 15). This fear arises from the reality that many Catholic schools do not have a specialist on staff who is available to provide intensive interventions. But the beauty of the RtI framework, which Boyle continues to lay out in subsequent chapters, is that it helps us to see when we are jumping from a bandage to the emergency room much too soon. As developed in chapter 4, Catholic schools can put in place a functioning team approach as well as access to small group instruction via careful administrative planning and communication, the guidance for which Boyle’s book provides. Both of these tier two practices will go a long way to help many students.

Of course, there will be a few students in every school for whom the supports of tier two will not be sufficient. Thus the need for tier three, which is the level where children get intensive interventions. Boyle tells us in fact that the word “most” best describes this level. Children who need tier three support need the most time, the most scaffolded instruction, and the most frequent progress monitoring, among other interventions. A key difference between tier two and tier three is that tier three is *individualized*. Some readers will wonder if tier three, in fact, is what we have come to call “special education.” Boyle does state that this will be the case in some schools. He writes:

The difficult aspect of Tier Three is that there is no universal model for delivery. Tier Three services are highly-individualized and many public schools will view this top tier as the provision of special education. It makes perfect sense that these special education resources could be used in this manner. The question for Catholic schools is not: “*How do we create special education systems in the Catholic school setting?*” Rather, the question should be: “*How do we create the most intensive support programs for students who experience the most intense struggle in our schools?*” [emphasis in original]. (p. 36)

In the ample appendix, the reader will find well-designed resources for implementing the RtI process in a Catholic school. Those schools that have a Teacher Assistance Team or TAT (a small group of teachers who provide support to colleagues regarding children who are struggling) will find professional development plans, methods for collecting data, and blank copies of the forms

and rubrics that an effective TAT will need. Those schools that have used other resources to create TATs will find that the language and recommendations found here will dovetail nicely with the structures they already have. This book will also be particularly useful to schools that have an interest in the Universal Design for Learning process and data-driven decision making.

Boyle is frank about the problems that Catholic schools encounter (i.e., financial) when planning specialized interventions. But in this readable and practical book, he has gone a long way toward succinctly identifying processes that all schools can put in place so as to create an optimum educational environment.

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